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American Self-Taught and Avant-Garde Art Explored in Major Traveling Exhibition Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington



Joseph Yoakum, *Briar Head Mtn of National Park Range of Bryce Canyon National Park near Hatch, Utah U.S.A.*, c. 1969, blue-black and black ballpoint pen and colored pencil on paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee and the Donald and Nancy de Laski Fund

Washington, DC—Their classification may have varied—from folk and primitive to naïve and visionary—but intermittently throughout the history of modern art, gates have opened, boundaries have dissolved, and those creating art on the periphery have entered the art world. ***Outliers and American Vanguard Art*** is the first major exhibition to explore those key moments in American art history when avant-garde artists and outsiders intersected, and how their interchanges ushered in new paradigms based on inclusion, integration, and assimilation. On view in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from January 28 through May 13, 2018, the exhibition brings together some 250 works in a range of media by more than 80 schooled and unschooled artists, such as Henry Darger, William Edmondson, Lonnie Holley, Greer Lankton, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Matt Mullican, Horace Pippin, Martín Ramírez, Betye Saar, Judith Scott, Charles Sheeler, Cindy Sherman, and Bill Traylor.

Spanning more than a century, paintings, sculptures, works on paper, photographs, books, and mixed-media assemblages are organized into three sections, each of which focuses on a distinct period when artists, art institutions, and audiences engaged intensively with the work of self-taught artists, or autodidacts: c. 1924–1943; c. 1968–1992; and c. 1998–2013. These pivotal periods of social, political, and cultural upheaval stimulated artistic interchanges that challenged or erased traditional hierarchies. While the show's first two sections historicize the evolving identities and roles of the distinctly American versions of modernism's "other," the last section proposes models for exhibiting art created on the periphery with that of the mainstream in ways that differ from today's prevalent approaches. Beyond bringing to light little-known or overlooked artists, ***Outliers and American Vanguard Art*** probes prevailing assumptions about creativity, artistic practice, and the role of the artist in contemporary culture.

"This groundbreaking exhibition considers how, and in what terms, self-taught art has been represented in the past, and how institutions like the Gallery might present it today," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art, Washington. "As the nation's collection of fine art, we are proud to initiate this discussion of what has been left out of American modernism's dominant narrative, and why it should be included."

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is made possible by a generous gift from the Smith-Kogod Family.

Exhibition Organization and Curator

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington and curated by Lynne Cooke, senior curator, special projects in modern art, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The exhibition is on view at the Gallery from January 28 through May 13, 2018; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from June 24 through September 30, 2018; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 18, 2018, through March 18, 2019.

Exhibition Highlights

c. 1924–1943

The first section of *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* concentrates on the years leading up and into World War II, when an interest in historic folk art developed in tandem with nativist desires to define a distinctively American cultural identity. *Early American Art*, an exhibition held in 1924 at the Whitney Studio Club (the predecessor to the Whitney Museum of American Art), comprised objects lent by artists such as Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Charles Sheeler, exemplifying the enthusiasm of credentialed artists for the work of their self-taught peers and predecessors—a noteworthy constant in the history of American modernism. The first gallery features one of the most revered folk art paintings of the day, the Gansevoort Limner's portrait of *Miss Van Alen* (c.1735), a reproduction of which hung in Sheeler's home. Such fertile intersections between mainstream artists and those on the art world's margins have played a determining if little studied role in shaping the narratives of American modernism, as have ground-breaking exhibitions at institutions such as the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art, which served as the primary conduits bringing work by artists who lacked formal academic training to widespread public view.

Presented in conjunction with paintings and photographs by Sheeler and Kuniyoshi are works by a cohort of artists variously drawn to modes of "primitivizing." Their motivations were diverse, as seen in the painting *Father Hoff* (1928) by Florine Stettheimer and the sculptures by her close friend Elie Nadelman. Stettheimer adopted a faux-naïf style to commemorate the denizens of her circle, after a decade of studying in Europe. Nadelman's quest to make inexpensive art that would reach as broad an audience as chalkware did in the 19th century was fueled by the collection of international folk art that he and his wife Viola housed in a museum they founded in the Bronx in 1926. Whereas, it was vernacular music—especially, spirituals and gospels—that became a prime source of inspiration for painters like Malcolm Gray Johnson and Palmer Hayden, who sought to create an authentically African American art.

And, not least, this section contains paintings and sculptures featured by Alfred H. Barr Jr., the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, in exhibitions he organized in an effort to establish the crucial role of the "modern primitive" in the burgeoning narratives of modernist art. Alongside European artists such as Henri Rousseau and Séraphine Louis, Barr promoted their contemporary American counterparts: John Kane, Horace Pippin, Patrociño Barela, and Morris Hirshfield, among others, placing the autodidacts on par with traditionally trained artists. With the rise of abstract expressionism in the aftermath of World War II, works by self-taught artists were seldom seen in East Coast institutions dedicated to modern and contemporary art in succeeding decades.

c. 1968–1992

Following the rise of the civil rights, feminist, antiwar, and gay rights movements and the efflorescence of the counterculture, the art world once again became highly receptive to the art of outliers. In the 1970s, the most dynamic interchanges took place in the Midwest, South, and California in response to the period's reconfiguration of 'otherness' to encompass those disenfranchised by race, class, gender, or ethnicity. The first gallery in this section focuses on a variety of autodidacts, including Joseph Yoakum, Drossos P. Skyllas, P. M. Wentworth, and Martín Ramírez, esteemed by Chicago imagists Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Barbara Rossi, Christina Ramberg, Roger Brown, and their peers (whose works are also on view). The imagists, a group of alumni from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, admired these "undiscovered" artists for the aesthetic qualities of their work and, above all, as role models for their independent pursuit of an inwardly driven creative expression.

Southern vernacular art is the focus of the following gallery in this section. *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, an exhibition organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1982 toured the country over the course of two years, gaining widespread recognition for the works it showcased by untutored African American artists, mostly from the South, including Sister Gertrude Morgan, James "Son Ford" Thomas, and Sam Doyle. The show's categorization of the artworks as "folk" proved controversial in various quarters. The art world embraced these artists as isolated, even alienated creators of private universes—visionaries—whereas the anthropologists and folklorists who contextualized their work by reference to community traditions, and evangelical, spiritual, and Africanist legacies, positioned them within the continuity of black diasporic cultural expression. This section of the exhibition also addresses artists often considered "outsiders" who gained renown in the contemporary art world for the singular environments they constructed, often over decades. While occasionally assembled in urban neighborhoods, they were more often created in small rural locations, like Fulton, Missouri, where Jesse Howard created his Sorehead Hill compound. In this period, as previously, vanguard artists considered the work of their unschooled counterparts on par with their own. By contrast, art world officials viewed visionaries and outsiders as incommensurables, self-absorbed creators whose work occupied a category of its own, and gained authenticity from its radical variance from the work of established artists.

Concluding this section are works by Californian artists, a number of whom emerged in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles after the 1965 riots, notably Betye Saar, Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, and Senga Nengudi. Seeking to create art that responded to their immediate era and heritage they drew from a range of sources: black vernacular artifacts, African tribal objects and rituals, anthropological and art historical

scholarship, and various modes of assemblage sculpture. Examples on view include Outterbridge's *Captive Image #4* (c. 1974–1976) from his Ethnic Heritage Group, which was based on his research into the use of figurines in indigenous and hybrid cultures, as well as Saar's *Indigo Mercy* (1975), composed of a syncretic altar, its spiritual valences potent but undefined.

c. 1998–2013

The late 1990s saw the integration of the works of schooled and unschooled artists together without hierarchical distinction on a level playing field. *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* ends with an exploration of the potential of this inclusive model. The final three galleries are organized around processes, materials, and practices that came to the forefront during this period: textiles and craft; photographically based work, and the construction of a cosmos whose narratives were directed to audiences, both actual and imagined. In each of these galleries art produced in manifestly different circumstances is put into conversation in ways that seek to reconcile the institutionalized chasm that traditionally segregates the credentialed from the disadvantaged. While not discounting such factors as privilege, agency, and access, difference is acknowledged as a fact and not a shortfall.

Thus textiles by Gee's Bend quilters Mary Lee Bendolph and Annie Mae Young engage works by Rosie Lee Tompkins, Alan Shields, and Mary Heilmann, while Judith Scott's intricate wrapped yarn sculptures share a gallery with works by Jessica Stockholder and Nancy Shaver, contemporary sculptors drawing on craft histories, gendered practices, and vernacular materials and forms. Among a number of photographs which probe the constraints, pressures, and pervasiveness of gender stereotypes are Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1979); Eugene von Bruenchenheim's tenderly erotic images of his wife, model, and muse, Marie; and Lee Godie's chameleon-like self-fashioning in both paintings and Polaroids.

The exhibition concludes with the projects of diverse "world imaginers," each of whom created a rich personal cosmos. While often reclusive, sometimes by design, sometimes through circumstance, artists as different as James Castle, James Benning, and Lonnie Holley, have sought to bring their epic visions to public view through a variety of channels. Some take the intimate form of illustrated books, texts, and manuscripts, while others turn to multimedia works which provide psychically as well as physically immersive experiences to those who venture into their encompassing imaginaries. Like the intersections generated in the adjacent galleries, the dialogues that emerge here reposition the conversation beyond social and cultural norms.

Catalog and Related Programs

Published by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, a fully illustrated catalog features Cooke's curatorial thesis, together with ground-breaking essays on a range of related topics by scholars Douglas Crimp, Darby English, Suzanne Hudson, Thomas Lax, Jennifer Jane Marshall, Richard Meyer, and Jenni Sorkin. In addition, the seminal 1982 exhibition, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980* is reevaluated in the transcript of a roundtable discussion between John Beardsley, one of the co-curators of that exhibition, Katherine Jentleson, the Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the High Museum, Atlanta, and Faheem Majeed, artist, educator, curator, and community facilitator, and Cooke. Featuring 467 illustrations, the 412-page catalog will be available in both hardcover and softcover at shop.nga.gov/, or by calling (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; faxing (202) 789-3047; or emailing mailorder@nga.gov.

Lecture

Introduction to the Exhibition

February 4 at 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Lynne Cooke, senior curator, special projects in modern art, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Public Symposium

Boundary Trouble: Self-Taught Artists and American Avant-Gardes

February 16-17, 10:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Papers will explore several subjects, including religion, gender, and cross-disciplinary art practices in the works of avant-garde and self-taught artists.

Concert

Sybarite5

January 28 at 3:30 p.m.

West Building, West Garden Court

Music by Andy Akiho, Jessica Meyer, Daniel Bernard Roumain, Piazzolla, Radiohead, as well as Armenian folk music.

Films

Avant-Garde to Underground: Outliers and Film

February 2–May 5

East Building Auditorium

In conjunction with ***Outliers and American Vanguard Art***, this series includes films by James Benning, whose *Stemple Pass* (2012) is on view in the exhibition, and underground filmmaker, Craig Baldwin, founder of San Francisco's Other Cinema, among others. Several programs of short experimental films and weekday screenings of documentaries about visual artists run throughout the exhibition.

Press Contact:

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt, Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc, and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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